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Mike Honda relaunches campaign for candy warning labels

By Aaron Davis
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San Jose Congressman Mike Honda on Thursday launched a second campaign for a bill requiring warning labels on candy, stemming from the choking deaths of two South Bay children linked to gel candy.

The Food Choking Prevention Act, which last year took a back seat to congressional debates over a war with Iraq, now has bipartisan support and a host of advocacy groups promising victory for the act in Congress.

"A simple notice instructing a parent to chop food into small pieces or refrain from serving certain foods to young children could save many kids' lives," said Bruce Silverglade, legal affairs director for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a non-profit organization that estimates at least one child dies every five days from choking on candy or other food items.

The bill is co-sponsored by Honda, a Democrat, and Rep. Mike Ferguson, R-N.J. It aims to cut choking deaths by giving the U.S. Food and Drug Administration the same powers to recall and put warning labels on food and candy as the Consumer Product Safety Commission has concerning toys.

The Mercury News in 2001 first reported the potential dangers of so-called gel candy when coroners' reports revealed that 3-year-old Deven Joncich of Morgan Hill and 11-year-old Michelle Enrile of San Jose died after choking on the same candy.

Following the news reports, the deaths of four other children were linked to the candy and the FDA took the unusual step of labeling the candy "unfit for food."

The FDA, however, had no authority to order gel candy removed from store shelves and was forced to engage in a monthslong effort of coaxing store owners and distributors to voluntarily stop selling it.

The choking act would require the FDA to establish an Office of Choking Hazard Evaluation; grant the FDA authority to require informational labels on food that pose high choking risks to kids; and give the agency mandatory recall authority over foods that pose an unacceptable choking risk.

The bill also would require the FDA to establish a national database of food choking incidents in order to more quickly respond to unusual patterns of choking deaths.

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